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ABSTRACT

There is great inherent educational value in teaching broadcast journalism students the proper techniques in videography, editing, writing, and producing. That is why Advanced Electronic News gathering students at Southern Arkansas University (SAU) are expected to do more than just point a camera and shoot. The ability to produce university news stories for a local NBC-TV affiliate gives students a flavor of what awaits them in the high pressure atmosphere of a professional television newsroom. An agreement was reached with KTVE-TV in Monroe, Louisiana to show student-produced Southern Arkansas University news reports. Footage is shot and edited on the SAU campus with Super-VHS equipment. Edited reports are then transferred to three-quarter inch videotape and sent by express mail with accompanying scripts to the Monroe news bureau. One can have the best educational ideas in teaching broadcasting, but there is no substitute for experience with the best technological equipment. (TB)

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"News Production: Professional Assignments for Broadcast Journalism Students in an Educational Setting."

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There is great inherent educational value in teaching broadcast journalism students the proper techniques in videography, editing, writing and producing. It is a process by which novice reporters can come to understand the immense power they potentially wield as professional journalists. They come to realize that researching stories involves much more than interviewing people on the street. A comprehensive writing style includes finding information in libraries and related data bases for the most comprehensive, accurate reportage possible.

That is why Advanced Electronic News gathering students at Southern Arkansas University are expected to do more than just point a camera and shoot. To be competitive in the current electronic media marketplace, they must possess a wide range of skills. The ability to produce university news stories for a local NBC-TV affiliate gives students a flavor of what awaits them in the high pressure atmosphere of a professional television newsroom.

I wanted to come up with an idea which could allow my students to get a leg up on their competition, in this case individuals at competing institutions in Arkansas and Louisiana which offer degrees in Mass Communication or Broadcast Journalism. An agreement was reached with KTVE-TV in Monroe, Louisiana to show student-produced Southern Arkansas University news reports. Footage is shot and edited on the SAU campus with Super-VHS equipment. Edited reports are then transferred to 3/4 inch

videotape and sent by express mail with accompanying scripts to the Monroe news bureau.

Even though students are responsible for generating their own story ideas, I serve as executive producer and final arbiter of what will eventually be covered. Numerous hours beyond regular Advanced Electronic News Gathering class times are spent in the production process. A variety of hard and soft news reports have been seen on KTVE-TV, with positive feedback coming from both the station and community. A corollary benefit of university news reports airing regionally is an enhanced name recognition of Southern Arkansas University. In fact, some new students say the reports they had seen on television were a factor in their decision to attend SAU.

My teaching style in electronic field production courses has evolved over a number of years. Initially, students primarily produced public service announcements, commercials and music videos in the introductory ENG course. When I arrived at Southern Arkansas University in 1987, quality camcorder technology was more easily available. Without the bulkiness and extra weight associated with older two-piece VHS cameras and recording packs, students could more easily produce comprehensive news reports. Budget constraints did not allow for the purchase of more expensive equipment. Completed student news reports were then transferred from VHS to the 3/4 inch format for resume videotapes.

Concentration on student-produced university news reports came in 1990, when more than $20,000 was made available by the Southern Arkansas University administration for new electronic field production equipment. Since more local news bureaus of network and cable television outlets were using Super-VHS cameras and editors, it was a logical choice for me to choose the format. We purchased four Panasonic cameras and a Super-VHS editing system complete with monitors, switcher, character generator and time base corrector. This equipment would be used in advanced courses, with students in the introductory course using a 1985 JVC VHS system.

One can have the best educational ideas in teaching broadcast journalism courses, but learning is best attained through the use of the newest and most reliable technology available at the time. With the problem of generational video loss lessened through acquisition of the Super-VHS system, the process of distributing news stories to local media outlets became more of a reality. Before 1990, the itinerary of my Advanced Electronic News Gathering course largely consisted of using the term to produce individual 30 minute documentaries. While the quality of these programs were outstanding, I wanted to have students work under the pressure of reporting news on a deadline.

My goal was to ensure the quality of these reports would approximate what was being produced by entry-level television reporters in small markets. Through hard work and many long hours,

my students became polished in writing, editing, on-air performance and news judgment. While we took some occasional heat in administrative quarters for some stories perceived as being unflattering to SAU, what could never be questioned were the facts obtained or the collective professionalism demonstrated by student reporters in the newsgathering process.

What will be shown as part of this program are representative samples of student-produced Southern Arkansas University news reports from the 1990-91 and 1991-92 academic years. Six hard and soft news stories have been selected for viewing at this BEA Production Showcase. They are titled, in order of appearance, "President Resigns", "Food Service", "Homecoming 1991", "SAU Tech (Camden)", "Christmas Candle" and "Brinson Charges". Titles of the first and last reports refer to the former president of SAU, Dr. Harold Brinson, currently defending himself in court on felony counts of theft and perjury.

My teaching style evidences itself on the videotape in terms of videography, editing, writing, voiceovers, sound bites and reporter stand-ups. I neither favor nor teach the new wave of self-conscious videography, in which a camera operator shoots footage similar in shakiness and excess movement to many home videos. This is an amateurish gimmick which takes away from the educational and reporting value of stories. Unless breaking news is taking place, lightweight Vivitar tripods are always used for

camera stability. When shooting sound bites, reporters are instructed to stand next to the camera operator. Interviewees look directly at the reporter, and a full head shot is achieved without it becoming a poorly-framed profile.

Stand-ups are intentionally placed in the context of the stories themselves, adding continuity and texture to the reports. Many local and network reporters are shown in closing shots, which I believe are largely dull and unimaginative. A proper stand-up should contain the visual metaphor of a story and serve as a bridge to the next voiceover or sound bite. Edits of stories, as can be seen from the scripts which follow this paper, are made by phrase or complete sentence structure. Visuals should tie in as closely with words whenever possible. Natural sound can be heard in these reports, as their texture and flavor are greatly enhanced. The results of such close attention to detail are professional-looking reports produced by individuals soon to enter the real world. VHS videotapes of these and other student-produced reports are available upon request.

I believe strongly in a higher education broadcast journalism curriculum which addresses the fundamentals of an ever-evolving marketplace for graduates. We cannot expect students to be competitive without giving them the tools possible for long-term professional success. Those of us who teach broadcasting, no matter how our curriculum is specifically titled, must keep current

in technological advances in television field production equipment and microcomputer applications in editing. Of course, writing and research will always be at the top of any list of student requirements for success. Ensuring that end also includes frequent contact with local and regional market professionals for feedback and advice. These news reports comprise only one of the steps in a long path my students take on the road to potential success in television news.